Bearing Witness as a Process for Responding to Trauma Survivors: A Review

Abstract

*Bearing witness* is a means for trauma survivors to give voice to lived experience. Bearing witness has been used in national and international commissions, inquiries, and tribunals to hear directly from survivors of abuse and trauma. This scoping review examines the documented research on the experience of survivors of trauma bearing witness. In 2021, six electronic data bases were searched – EBSCO, Informit, CINHAL, Clarivate, ProQuest, and Sage – and a search of the grey literature, revealed 1,201 references for studies between 1990 and 2021. After applying the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework 21 studies that met inclusion criteria were identified. The inclusion criteria focused on studies where survivors expressed their views on bearing witness to trauma in official processes inclusive of public or private testimony, verbal or written. These studies utilized a range of methodologies and designs that represented the perspectives of 3,192 survivors of trauma who had borne witness. Analysis of the studies resulted in key findings under four themes: healing versus re-traumatisation, support and safety of survivors, engaging and involving survivors, and culture and context. The literature indicates that bearing witness is a critical means to give voice to survivors of trauma and to provide them with acknowledgment; however, the literature is inconclusive regarding the impact of bearing witness on survivors. More research is required to better understand how survivors can best benefit and be supported by processes of bearing witness, and not be harmed or re-traumatised.

*Keywords:* Abuse; bearing witness; survivors; testimony; trauma; truth-telling; victims
For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement (Frankl, 1959, as cited in Southwick et al., 2006, p. 165).

**Introduction**

In this quote, Viktor Frankl uses the language of bearing witness. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, suffered the horrors of World War II, an experience that was formative in the development of his theories and practice as a psychiatrist. Fundamental to his understanding were two beliefs: we must find meaning in suffering and in our lives, and we have freedom to choose our response to a given situation (Frankl, 2008). Finding meaning in the trauma experience was Frankl’s significant contribution to working with survivors.

*Bearing witness* to testimonies of trauma can take many forms and is applied in a range of circumstances. Atkinson-Phillips (2016) examined the role of memorial, specifically the interaction between sculpture and oral history to connect with lived experiences of trauma. Other references show the use of bearing witness to remember and acknowledge through art (Dell’aria, 2020); theatre (Simic, 2014); photography (Nance, 2018); graphic novels (DeTora, 2020); and art therapy (Saltzman, 2013). The terminology of bearing witness is often used in a therapeutic context in disciplines such as nursing, psychology, social work, law, and medicine. The recent Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements have used social media to bear witness.

Bearing witness to trauma developed following World War II, when there was an emergent feeling among Holocaust survivors that they had a duty to speak up about what they witnessed. In the late 1960s, the Adolf Eichmann Trial, in Israel, became a critical moment in
Holocaust history where a very public bearing of witness occurred. The trial was televised globally; for the first time, eyewitness testimony of the Holocaust was seen by the world, and social denial was no longer possible (Laub & Hamburger, 2017). In the 1970s, there was a call for witnesses to the atrocities of the Holocaust to record their lived experience. These recorded witness narratives became the Fortunoff Video Archive collection at the Yale University Library, which has assembled more than 4,400 publicly available interviews with survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust.

In the 1970s, Latin America held truth commissions to address human rights abuses perpetrated by dictatorships. These focused on hearing the stories of people as a means of healing and looking to a better future and documented individual cases including atrocities in what is called Nunca Mass or Never Again projects, as a protection against forgetting (Humphrey, 2003). In this context, psychotherapists who were working with survivors of political torture developed the use of testimony as a therapeutic tool (Devitt, 2009). Initially used in Chile to assist survivors of the dictatorship, testimony was considered advantageous over therapy because it linked “personal trauma with its origins in political oppression” (Sangster, 1999, p. 45). Testimony in these truth commissions became a political act enabling citizens to place their trauma experience on the official, public, and historical record.

The 1990s saw increasing attention to hearing directly from survivors in public inquiries. Key among these have been Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC), such as the South African TRC (1996–2003), and War Crime Tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (1993–2017). Redressing nations’ human rights abuses through these mechanisms has been termed transitional justice referring to a process of building social trust and political reform. There are three main propositions: there is no
adequate response to historical traumatic events; failure to respond is unacceptable; and the response requires the pursuit of truth (Jones, 2016). The term *truth-telling* has been used to describe where personal trauma becomes public. Commissions have a role in shaping a narrative that can potentially “curb the scourge of impunity” and “restore dignity to survivors” while pursuing the prevention of similar occurrences in the future (Henry, 2010, p 1098). A common theme of public hearings is to acknowledge contested and traumatic experiences as a record and national memory (Bakiner, 2016; Bisset, 2012; Devitt, 2009; Humphrey, 2003). This approach is less adversarial than a trial process (Stanton, 2011) with a focus on the experience of victims (Niezen, 2016), restorative principles, conflict resolution, and reconciliation, rather than retributive justice and punishment. Healing through storytelling has been highlighted where bearing witness has been used in indigenous cultures in South Africa, Australia, and Canada (Ariss, 2021; Sium & Ritskes, 2013).

Official apologies have been linked to the public bearing of witness, which effectively is an admission by the state, or in some cases institutions, of past failures. Since World War II, apologies have become more frequent, spreading beyond crimes such as the Holocaust to issues including racial discrimination, social wrongs, and institutional failings (Swain, 2014, p. 10). While debate continues about the value of apologies, potential benefits include acknowledging past failures by governments/institutions, expressing regret, and accepting responsibility (Andrieu, 2009).

Acknowledgement is seen as central to recovery. The South African TRC wrote in their final report, “… the Commission embodied a moral and therapeutic process that aimed at acknowledging suffering and giving victims an opportunity to tell their stories” (South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 1998, p. 144). This acknowledgement is often
linked to change and reconciliation. In Canada the TRC sought to create a witnessing public to the abuses faced by Indigenous people (Ariss, 2021). The TRC used non-First Nations people to bear witness to survivors’ stories (of institutionalised physical and sexual abuse that occurred in 139 Christian residential schools) encouraging concrete demonstrations of reconciliation. It had a powerful effect with one witness reflecting, “By listening to your story, my story can change. By listening to your story, I can change” (Fontaine et al., 2015, p. 160).

By the mid-2010s, following growing pressure to deal with large volumes of complaints concerning the historical abuse of children in institutions, governments saw approximately 20 inquiries into institutional child abuse around the world (Swain et al., 2018). These inquiries were established following advocacy by survivors and broke new ground by enabling survivors to tell their stories of abuse as children and its lasting effects. Earlier inquiries into child welfare did not privilege the lived experience of survivors or provide a basis to contest institutional accounts of their failings (Swain et al., 2018). A new discourse emerged from these inquiries, largely through the expression of survivors’ experiences, which challenged and ultimately changed the secrecy, historical denials, and minimising of institutional abuse of children. Concerns about being judged, disbelieved, or blamed, are commonly reported by survivors and this can mitigate against individuals disclosing abuse and publicly telling their stories (Herbert, J. et al., 2020; Kennedy & Whitlock, 2011). In a religious context, these feelings can be complicated where survivors’ self-identity may be entwined with the church and abusers invoke God to silence victims (Easton et al., 2019). In court processes there can be limits on the ability of victims of human rights abuses, especially rape, to bear witness (Henry, 2010).
In analysing international adjudication of wartime rape cases, Mertus (2004) described attempts to advocate for the victims of sexual violence at the International Criminal Tribunal Yugoslavia as akin to “shouting from the bottom of the well” (p. 110). Others have been critical of courts for the limited consideration given to victims’ views (McEvoy & McConnachie, 2013) and difficulties associated with the public disclosure of sexual violence and the negative consequences that can follow for victims (Guthrey, 2016).

In some cases, bearing witness occurs as part of a restorative justice process. Restorative justice in these contexts involve survivors in planned sessions speaking with institutional authorities. Survivors share their story of abuse and authorities can acknowledge the abuse and its impact, deliver an apology, and provide practical information to reassure that abuse will not occur again. Examples can be found in Australia initiated as part of the Defence Abuse Response Taskforce and through the current National Redress Scheme.

Official inquiries that use survivor testimony often proclaim to promote healing at the individual and national levels. As such, they are premised on the assumption that having a survivor tell their trauma story benefits the survivor (Devitt, 2009; Hamber et al., 2000). Positive claims of bearing witness to trauma for survivors include catharsis (Androff, 2012), therapeutic or healing (de la Rey & Owens, 1999; Sangster, 1999), and opportunity for forgiveness (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2008; Staub, 2000). Despite the perceived benefits, bearing witness is a contested area (McEvoy & McConnachie, 2013; Mendeloff, 2009; Stover, 2005) that requires examination of the experience of survivors publicly bearing witness. Bearing witness through public processes is not the same as therapy. Mendeloff (2009) states “… there is little evidence that truth-telling in general dramatically harms individuals, the notion that formal truth-telling processes … eases their (victims) emotional and psychological suffering
… remains highly dubious” (Mendeloff, 2009, p. 596). O'Loughlin (2007) cautions that the act of speaking about trauma could itself re-traumatise some survivors.

This paper examines the current state of knowledge on bearing witness, including the impact on survivors of trauma in contexts such as commissions, inquiries, and tribunals\(^1\). The authors have taken a broad view of trauma to examine the experience of survivors bearing witness, and have, therefore, included research that examines trauma as a result of war crimes and civil unrest, and trauma because of institutional abuse. Abuse and violations can have substantial deleterious impacts on individuals, families, and communities; yet trauma impacts people differently and is not linear in its presentation across the life course. The present study is focused on the narrative form of bearing witness, that is, the telling of a trauma story by the survivor placed on the public record with, or without, identifying information.

This scoping study attempts to address a gap in the literature by focusing on survivors’ experience in order to answer the question: *What is known from the existing literature about the experience for survivors\(^2\) of trauma bearing witness?*

**Method**

Scoping review processes are used to explore and systematically examine the literature. The advantages of scoping reviews are their systematic, transparent, and replicable qualities (Grant & Booth, 2009). Additionally, scoping reviews enable the identification of themes,

---

\(^1\) The term ‘official processes’ has been used in this paper to refer to commissions, inquiries, and tribunals.

\(^2\) Note: The authors recognise that a variety of terms are used to describe those who have experienced abuse and persecution. Commonly used terms are *victims* and *survivors* and in some of the studies reviewed, *participants* and *witnesses* are also used. This paper uses the term *survivor* when referring to those who have experienced trauma. However, when discussing individual research studies, the terminology of that research is used. The authors acknowledge that these terms are not without problems and mean different things to different people and that individuals will have preferences in terms of which language is used.
strengths, and gaps in the literature (Levac et al., 2010; Tricco et al. 2016). This scoping review followed Arksey and O'Malley’s (2005) five-stage framework for the scoping study: Stage 1 identifies the research question, Stage 2 identifies relevant studies; Stage 3 is study selection; Stage 4 is charting the data; and Stage 5 involves collating, summarising, and reporting the results.

A broad search of the literature was undertaken by one reviewer (PW) who is qualified (MSW) with experience in both service delivery and policy development in health and human services. PW has worked with individuals who have experienced trauma. The other two authors, one of whom has expertise in child and adult sexual assault, trauma and bearing witness, are experienced researchers who provided supervision, direction, and review of selected articles.

Stage 2 used key words to identify studies. Searches were performed between February and June 2021, using the databases EBSCO, Informit, CINHAL, Clarivate, ProQuest and Sage. The terms used in the searches were bearing witness, truth-telling, trauma, testimony, victims, survivors, trauma testimony, and Holocaust. The parameters for the search included international coverage for research published after 1990 to ensure that the literature was contemporary and that the South African TRC (established 1995), a landmark commission, was captured in the search. Only English-language and peer-reviewed papers were considered along with unpublished dissertations, published books, and reports.

In the initial database search, 894 items were identified. A further review of the references of the relevant articles revealed the need to search additionally for some specific national and
international tribunals and commissions. A search of the grey literature resulted in an additional 307 references, taking the total to 1,201 references.

Stage 3 enabled the development of an inclusion criteria to select literature relevant to the scoping review question. The authors were conscious of the need to critically appraise the literature and understood an element of judgement needed to be applied regarding the appropriateness or adequacy of the approach taken in the individual studies and, therefore, were informed by the appraisal framework developed by Long et al. (2004). According to Long (2004), appraisal of qualitative research studies should include considerations of the setting rationale, appropriateness of the sample, adequacy of description of fieldwork, and adequate evidence to support analysis. Here, the central focus is on the experience of survivors; therefore, research that engaged with survivors of trauma and that asked them about their experience of bearing witness was included. The inclusion criteria included the type of study, the official process (e.g., commission, inquiry, tribunal), and the involvement of survivors bearing witness to trauma. The bearing witness to trauma criteria was inclusive of public or private testimony, verbal or written.

The categories of exclusion were: duplicates; book reviews; editorials; commentary; items where there was no clear research method; participants were not victims or survivors; or the full text could not be located. The application of the criteria for inclusion and exclusion reduced the number of items from 1,201 to 21. The number of articles identified and then included and excluded through the search and analysis process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and the improved model for scoping reviews in Tricco et al. (2016), Figure 1.
In Stage 4, charting the data, there is a “synthesizing and interpreting qualitative data by sifting, charting, and sorting materials according to key issues or themes” (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 26). A data charting template was developed to capture a mixture of general and specific information from each selected study. This was an iterative process with articles reviewed many times to ensure consistency with the research question and purpose (Levac et al., 2010).

In Stage 5, having charted information, data were collated and summarised to report the results (Table 1). This comprised completing a numerical analysis, including the type and number of study participants, the range of study methods employed, the number of similar and different outcomes, and gaps in studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Through analysis of the identified studies, an assessment was made, and recorded, about whether the study found mostly positive, negative, mixed, or neutral outcomes for survivors. By reflecting on and reviewing the studies several times, themes became clear and are reported in the findings.

**Findings**

The studies examined survivors who had borne witness describing different types of psychological trauma that occurred within particular contexts and cultures. For example, the studies included survivors of trauma emerging from torture during war and civil conflicts, as well as historical institutional abuse. The common thread of trauma in these studies resulted from human rights abuses involving powerful institutions that led to official processes where survivors were encouraged to talk about their trauma. All the studies engaged survivors and sought to understand their experience. Each of the 21 studies (Table 1) varied in some aspects of their research outcome focus. A few studies focused on the TRC process to learn how testifying in public affects psychological health (Funkeson et al., 2011; Kaminer et al., 2001;
Stein et al., 2008). Others focused on outcomes related to mental health (Brounéus, 2008), or subjective perceptions and collective perceptions (Kanyangara et al., 2014). Some of the studies had specific focuses on bearing witness as it related to, for example, justice (Backer, 2004; Lundy, 2020; Robins, 2012), testifying (Stepakoff et al., 2015), the legal process (Dembour & Haslam, 2004), attitudes to and expectations of the TRC (Hamber et al., 2000), responses to perpetrators (Byrne, 2004), and healing (Androff, 2012; Brounéus, 2010; Guthrey, 2016). Some studies examined witnesses and survivors’ experiences of the process (Horn et al., 2009a; Horn et al., 2009b; Human Rights Centre UC Berkely School of Law, 2014; King & Meernik, 2019; Pembroke, 2019; Stover, 2005).

The 21 studies concerned 10 countries: the Congo, Northern Ireland (the United Kingdom), the Republic of Ireland, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Timor-Leste, the United States, and the former Yugoslavia. The former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and the Congo were all party to the International Criminal Court following human rights abuses. Studies in Solomon Islands, South Africa, Timor-Leste, and the United States relate to TRCs. Two studies in Ireland and Northern Ireland relate to institutional child abuse inquiries. Of the 21 studies, five involved survivors who had participated in the South African TRC, and four studies were conducted with witnesses who gave testimony in post-genocide Rwanda.

Across the 21 studies, a total 3,192 survivors of trauma had borne witness through speaking to a commission, inquiry, or tribunal, or by providing written statements or testimony. In the Robins (2012) study, the 69 families interviewed were counted as one participant for each family towards the total number of 3,192. Study methods to measure outcomes included interviews, focus groups, surveys, questionnaires, the use of diagnostic checklists and scales,
and analysis of witness transcripts. In one large study, Stein et al. (2008) used a nationally representative survey of 4,351 individuals across South Africa, which included 26 individuals who indicated they had testified in some form at the South African TRC.

The largest study engaged 1,200 participants who were witnesses to the Rwandan human rights abuses (Brounéus, 2010). The smallest study (Funkeson et al., 2011) had 8 participants, all of whom had provided witness testimony in the Rwandan gacacas community courts. Eight studies (Androff, 2012; Brounéus, 2008; Byrne, 2004; Dembour, 2004; Funkeson et al., 2011; Guthrey, 2016; Hamber, 2000; Pembroke, 2019) had 30 participants or less. The studies were published between 2000 and 2021. One study (Backer, 2004) is a thesis, two studies (Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014; Lundy, 2020) are reports, and another (Stover, 2005) is a chapter within a published book. The remaining seventeen were studies published in peer-reviewed journals in English.

The study outcomes were categorised by the researchers as positive, or negative, based on feedback received from survivors regarding their experience of bearing witness. Through a thorough reading, review, and analysis of the outcomes from each study, it became clear there were four categories: studies in which survivors had generally positive views of their experience of bearing witness; those whose experiences were generally negative; those studies where survivors’ experiences were mixed; and one study that was categorised as neutral. This is demonstrated in Table 1 under the Outcomes/Results section, where each of the 21 studies is given a rating (“+”, “−”, “mixed”, or “neutral”), with a brief supporting summary statement. For example, in Byrne (2004) the results were assessed as mixed and concurred with the author’s own conclusion that for some victims the experience was positive, for others painful. This enabled the scoping study to effectively compare, contrast,
and identify themes, to discuss commonalities, differences, gaps in knowledge, and areas for future research.

Of the 21 studies: 8 reported mostly positive outcomes (Androff, 2012; Horn et al., 2009a, 2009 b; Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014; Kanyangara et al., 2014; King & Meernik, 2019; Stepakoff et al., 2015; Stover, 2005); 8 reported mostly negative outcomes (Backer, 2004; Brounéus, 2008, 2010; Dembour & Haslam, 2004; Guthrey, 2016; Pembroke, 2019; Robins, 2012; Stein et al., 2008); four showed mixed outcomes (Byrne, 2004; Funkeson et al., 2011; Hamber et al., 2000; Lundy, 2020); and one had what could be described as a *neutral* outcome (Kaminer et al., 2001).

The eight studies that found survivors’ involvement in bearing witness was mostly positive revealed the advantages as empowering (Stepakoff et al., 2015), healing, and validating (Androff, 2012): survivors reported feelings of confidence and relief (Horn et al., 2009b, p. 295). Other studies indicated survivors benefited from testifying and stated they would testify again (Horn et al., 2009a; Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014). Additionally, participation led to a reduction in survivors’ personal and collective guilt (Kanyangara et al., 2014), and survivors were motivated and positive about testifying (King & Meernik, 2019; Stover, 2005).

Eight studies found survivors’ involvement in bearing witness in official processes was mostly negative. These studies identified the disadvantages as:

- official processes left survivors disappointed with the lack of justice, often due to limited progress on redress and investigations (Backer, 2004);
- significant safety concerns for survivors (Brounéus, 2008);
witnesses were found to have higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder compared to non-witnesses (Brounéus, 2010);

- legal procedures, processes and motivations leading to an inability to hear survivors stories (Dembour & Haslam, 2004);

- concerns about processes not attending to local norms and culture and resulting in poor outcomes for survivors (Guthrey, 2016; Robins, 2012);

- concerns about the lack of justice, that is, perpetrators not named, investigated or prosecuted (Pembroke, 2019); and,

- attendance at a TRC associated with increased distress or anger and decreased forgiveness (Stein et al., 2008).

Four studies (Byrne, 2004; Funkeson et al., 2011; Hamber et al., 2000; Lundy, 2020) showed mixed results when it came to the experience of survivors bearing witness. For example, Byrne (2004) found some survivors reported the experience of bearing witness was positive and empowering while others in the same study found it painful and disempowering. Hamber et al. (2000) found that while there were positive aspects for survivors, such as the use of public testimony and the acknowledgement survivors received, ultimately most survivors felt let down by the lack of prosecution and justice. Survivors who bore witness at the Northern Ireland Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry (Lundy, 2020) found the process helpful in terms of breaking the silence and receiving acknowledgement, while also reporting the experience as painful and retraumatising.

One study (Kaminer et al., 2001) has been classified as a neutral outcome because it found “… no significant difference in the rates of depression, PTSD or anxiety disorders for
participants who gave public testimony, closed testimony, or no testimony” (p. 375), to the South African TRC.

Analysis showed complexity in survivor outcomes, especially among those with negative or mixed results. This points to survivors’ unmet expectations with respect to, for example, holding perpetrators to account, lack of follow through on redress, and the preparation and support of witnesses. As such, it is worth considering the question of healing versus re-traumatisation of survivors, and then considering other areas that emerged from the review under these three themes: support and safety, engaging and involving survivors, and culture and context.

**Healing Versus Re-traumatisation of Survivors.** Official processes that encourage survivors of trauma to bear witness have frequently seen their role as one of healing at the individual and societal level. It would be simplistic to present the findings along the lines of positive or negative impacts of survivors. Rather the results also illuminate differences in process, context, purpose, participation, and engagement that are critical results for any interpretative analysis.

Catharsis, a process of release of emotion associated with healing, is sometimes suggested as beneficial for survivors of trauma. Our study found contrasting views. Androff (2012) reported that survivors who bore witness at the Greensboro TRC described “the cathartic release as coming from expressing feelings” (p. 42). Robins’ (2012) study in Timor-Leste concluded that, “The cathartic metaphor… lacks meaning for a family confronted daily with the unmet basic needs that a rise from the loss of a breadwinning husband or a son” (p. 101). Brounéus (2008) challenged the assumption that truth-telling is healing, citing five women in
her Rwandan study who could not continue their testimonies due to severe psychological
distress, with some re-experiencing their traumas. A study in South Africa (Stein et al., 2008)
found survivors bearing witness had increased distress or anger and decreased forgiveness.

Research commissioned through the Northern Ireland Inquiry (Lundy, 2020) reported
survivors were generally positive regarding the acknowledgement they received; however,
some had mixed views regarding public telling of their trauma stories indicating that bearing
witness was traumatising, even abusive, leaving them feeling vulnerable and victimised.
Pembroke’s (2019) research on the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Republic of
Ireland) found most survivors experienced shame and guilt and described their experience as
re-traumatising. No research evidence was found regarding the long-term impact in terms of
healing for survivors from bearing witness; however, in some of the studies reviewed
(Backer, 2004; Brounéus, 2008, 2010; Byrne, 2004; Guthrey, 2016; Pembroke, 2019; Robins,
2012) there does appear to be evidence of harm or potential harm to survivors.

Support and Safety of Survivors. Support and safety of survivors is central to ensuring the
lived experience of trauma is heard and assists in movement towards justice. While some
studies (Horn et al., 2009a, 2009 b; Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014)
found survivors felt supported, it was concerning that in other studies survivors felt
unsupported (Backer, 2004; Brounéus, 2008) and let down by the process (Hamber et al.,
2000). Where survivors felt supported, the factors found to have contributed were:

- the inclusion of structured and safe spaces for survivors and a respectful audience
  (Androff, 2012);

- external professional support (King and Meernik, 2019);
equal and fair treatment by official processes (Backer, 2004; King & Meernik, 2019); and,

• support and respect by staff of official processes towards survivors (Horn et al., 2009b; Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014).

Many of the studies (Androff, 2012; Backer, 2004; Brounéus, 2008, 2010; Byrne, 2004; Dembour & Haslam, 2004; Funkeson et al., 2011; Horn et al., 2009b; Kaminer et al., 2001; King & Meernik, 2019; Stein et al., 2008) recommended additional support for survivors. The importance of support and preparation of survivor witnesses has also been linked to improved outcomes for survivors (Dembour & Haslam, 2004; Horn et al. 2009b).

Three studies (Brounéus, 2008; Funkeson et al., 2011; Guthrey, 2016) specifically pointed to the concerns that women raised in relation to bearing witness. Guthrey (2016) found women survivors of sexual violence felt re-traumatised and stigmatised because the TRC process disregarded local norms and beliefs, such as women not testifying in front of men. Brounéus (2008) identified serious personal safety issues for women including “… threats, harrassment, and violence” (p. 71). These issues pose important questions about who bearing witness purports to serve. The concern is that bearing witness through official processes focuses on the outcome, without ensuring survivors are adequately prepared and supported.

**Engaging and Involving Survivors.** The 21 studies illustrate varying degrees of survivor engagement and involvement. Some of the studies, unsurprisingly, indicate that good engagement of survivors will result in improved outcomes, both for the individual and for the process. In examining the South African TRC, Backer (2004) found that participation makes a difference for survivors; however, there is some complexity to participation in TRC processes and the quality of the experience for survivors needs to be considered.
Bearing witness allows survivors to speak for themselves (McEvoy & McConnachie, 2013), rather than being spoken for, whereas, lack of engagement and involvement of survivors can result in frustration with bureaucracy. The personal impact of participation, both physical and emotional (Byrne, 2004), can be debilitating, especially when expectations are not met. Robins’s (2012) study points to the value of engaging survivors in the design and evaluation of the justice process. Survivors will often have strong motivations for bearing witness (Lundy, 2020) and may view participation as important for “… discharging their moral duty to family and community” (Stover, 2005, p. 135).

**Culture and Context Considerations.** A few studies (Brounéus, 2008; Guthrey, 2016; Robins, 2012) made specific reference to the clear need for cultural and contextual consideration in the way bearing witness processes are conducted, and adapted, to accommodate cultural norms. Women who testified about sexual violence in the Timor-Leste TRC were sometimes ostracised by their communities, causing stress and questioning of the wisdom of promoting healing through public testimony (Guthrey, 2016).

In the South African TRC, many survivors were left feeling justice was only half done (Backer, 2004), particularly in cases where no punishment was dispensed for perpetrators. This is clearly a challenge for official processes which must find a balance between finding the truth (often through allowing those who have been historically silenced to bear witness) and investigating and prosecuting perpetrators. Analysis of victim–witness transcripts at the International Criminal Tribunal found the demands the legal process places on witnesses led to them “feeling silenced” (Dembour & Haslam, 2004, p. 151). In Pembroke’s (2019) study focused on survivors of Industrial and Reformatory schools, children who by court order
were placed in institutions found bearing witness difficult, with one survivor stating: “…
going back to see a judge doesn’t sit easy with me” (p. 52).

Discussion
This scoping review set out to understand the current state of knowledge on survivors’
experience of bearing witness. Given that numerous nations use and invest in processes of
bearing witness in public investigations on state failures and perpetration of human rights
abuses, the first noteworthy finding in the present study is the lack of empirical research that
could shed light on its utility.

The results of the scoping review indicate that there was an even split – eight to eight – with
respect to positive and negative outcomes from the studies. In the four studies (Byrne, 2004;
Funkeson et al., 2011; Hamber et al., 2000; Lundy, 2020) that showed mixed impact of
bearing witness on survivors, there was some consensus that the process left participants
conflicted, and the sense of healing incomplete. Talking about trauma experiences is likely to
be stressful and distressing for survivors and, as such, it can have contradictory, and co-
occurring affects, such as hope and despair (O'Loughlin, 2007). Contradictory positions were
also seen in varying degrees in many of the other studies. This is perhaps unsurprising as the
bearing of witness, although providing important recognition to the survivor, may only
partially satisfy the desire for justice. As Herman (1992) said “… two responses – recognition
and restitution – are necessary to rebuild the survivor’s sense of order and justice” (p. 70).

Bearing witness comes at risk for survivors’ mental health due to the likely stress and
possible re-traumatisation (Brounéus, 2008, 2010; Byrne, 2004; Dembour & Haslam, 2004;
Lundy, 2020; Pembroke, 2019). However, bearing witness can also be empowering, cathartic,
and a positive experience helpful to survivors’ recovery (Androff, 2012; Horn et al., 2009a, 2009 b; Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law, 2014; King & Meernik, 2019; Stepakoff et al., 2015). The results of this review point to the high likelihood that bearing witness may not be suitable for all survivors, both due to the nature and context of the trauma experienced, as well as the practice employed by the official process. Individual preferences, along with current functioning or circumstances for the survivor at the time of testimony, are also factors for consideration, as well as culture and gender. These factors illuminate the need for survivor engagement, participation, and empowerment, to address survivors’ likely feelings, such as vulnerability, powerlessness, and stigmatisation. Table 3 summarises implications for practice, policy, and research.

**Recommendations**

The *Critical Findings* (Table 2) highlight key results from this scoping study. A *survivor-centred approach* is the overarching implication of the scoping review. This requires the use of a *trauma lens* to ensure that processes are designed, developed, implemented, and evaluated with the survivor in mind, and that they are attuned to the ongoing impacts of trauma. Safety considerations are paramount. Survivors must feel supported before, during, and after bearing witness. A *one-size-fits-all* approach is ineffective; there needs to be a willingness to be flexible, to adjust processes to accommodate survivors’ needs, while mindful of context and cultural considerations.

There is recognition of the constraints associated with individuals publicly telling their stories due to survivors’ “social suffering” (Kennedy & Whitlock, 2011) and an understanding there can be a variety of ways to engage with survivors. The Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuses (2013–2017) provided survivors with some
choice in how they participated in bearing witness. For many survivors, there will be limitations to verbalising their experience and consideration of alternatives is required (Motsemme 2004). There are some examples that provide alternatives to public bearing witness in official processes. In New Zealand, a *listening service* for survivors of abuse in state care was run between 2008 and 2015 to provide an ongoing opportunity to bear witness (Henwood, 2015). A storytelling model called *My Story*, supports Bosnian ethnic groups (Bosniak, Croat, and Serb) to tell their stories of war (Oberpfalzerová et al., 2019). In Canada the *I Am A Witness* campaign focuses on First Nations children and youth and “facilitates public access to the tribunal hearing – through attendance or access to documents or both” (Ariss, 2021, p. 129).

For the purposes of this review, bearing witness is connected to the conduct of an official process, conducted within particular timeframes, and therefore time limited. It would be interesting to consider the benefits for survivors of employing processes to bear witness in an ongoing way. In examining the South African TRC, Hamber et al. (2000) suggested “leaving the door open for survivors to continue to … undertake actions … that may move them closer to a point of emotional closure” (p. 39).

**The Listener**

While the focus of this review is on the survivor experience, this cannot be separated from the role of the “listener”, or the audience who have a role in hearing the survivor speak of their trauma. “Witnessing, particularly in the context of telling stories of human rights violations, often includes a request to the audience to become morally accountable for an event” (Ariss, 2021, p. 115). While the survivor is a witness to the trauma, the listener bears witness to the survivor’s experience and, therefore, staff of official processes and the public...
have critical roles to play in bearing witness. Consideration is required of psychological support for those listening to survivors’ stories of trauma (Hamber, 1998). Promising research (Kim et al., 2021) is emerging that supports the benefits that vicarious trauma intervention programs can have, including vicarious resilience and post-traumatic growth.

Limitations

Only 21 studies were identified that examined the survivor experience of bearing witness. Of the identified studies, outcomes were difficult to compare, and results were often polarised and inconclusive. A limitation was a sole researcher completing the search. Comparisons between studies was difficult due to the use of different research focus and methodology, numbers of research participants, and the large variation in the aims and objectives of official processes. Survivor experience varied from study to study and within studies. In part, this is likely due to the different context and type of trauma, as well as the heterogenous profile of most survivor populations. Nevertheless, the review has identified other factors that may contribute to this variance of experience and outcomes. These include:

- the experience of trauma (witnessed or experienced);
- the impact of trauma on the individual;
- the length of time between the trauma and the study;
- the support received by the survivor to deal with the trauma, to bear witness, and to participate in the study;
- the motivation for the survivor in bearing witness;
- the expectations of survivors;
- survivors’ perception of the delivery of justice; and,
- survivors’ context and circumstance.
Further Research

The initial broad sweep of the relevant literature found numerous case studies and commentary related to official processes where trauma survivors bore witness, but little research focused on hearing from survivors regarding their experience. This scoping study challenges the accepted response that survivors bearing witness is beneficial (South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 1998). In doing so, it adds knowledge on how to best hear survivors’ voices and achieve some healing and reconciliation, while at the same time being mindful of the need to not further silence, or isolate, survivors of trauma; therefore, to do no harm or exacerbate harm. These complexities require further investigation. Eleven of the studies (Androff, 2012; Brounéus, 2010; Byrne, 2004; Dembour & Haslam, 2004; Funkeson et al., 2011; Hamber et al., 2000; Horn et al., 2009b; Kanyangara et al., 2014; King & Meernik, 2019; Stepakoff et al., 2015; Stover, 2005) suggested further research focused on survivor experiences of bearing witness, including consideration of benefits and risks.

This scoping review identified only two empirical studies (Lundy, 2020; Pembroke, 2019) examining the experience of survivors bearing witness regarding institutional child abuse in the last two decades. Inquiries and commentary on childhood survivors promote the value of bearing witness as if it is intuitively obvious that it will be positive (Fontaine et al., 2015; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into Child Sexual Abuse, 2017); yet, as demonstrated in this review, the empirical evidence for this is relatively under-developed and inconclusive. Research is, therefore, urgently required to understand the utility, and to determine the circumstances, in which bearing witness processes might best be employed, and developed. For example, to date, research using data from private bearing witness sessions in the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2014-2017) has been narrow in its focus on survivor testimony as a means of learning
how the atrocities occurred, rather than the impact of the telling on survivors (Herbert J. et al., 2020). It is useful, therefore, to encourage studies to learn and assess the effectiveness of bearing witness, particularly from child abuse survivors’ perspectives.

**Conclusions**

Bearing witness provides an important means to give voice to lived experiences through placing survivors at the centre of the process, allowing for reconciliation, ensuring the truth about the past is exposed and individuals’ trauma is acknowledged, while reforming the dominant historical account of events. Survivors have highlighted the powerful role of *recognition* (Herman, 1992), which occurs in acknowledging the trauma, and the important role of apologising, as essential for healing. Critical findings of this review point to areas of risk, opportunity, and further investigation, while highlighting the need for official processes to ensure that bearing witness practices are truly focused on survivors. Although imperfect, bearing witness with a focus on survivors, can be helpful to individuals, communities, and countries as one important step towards healing, justice, and truth. At its best, bearing witness can, as Frankl (1959) has said, … *transform a personal tragedy into a triumph.*
References


[http://www.bran่อนhamber.com/publications/Journal%20Telling%20it%20like%20it%20is%20PINS%20Final.pdf](http://www.branMonadhamber.com/publications/Journal%20Telling%20it%20like%20it%20is%20PINS%20Final.pdf)

https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210382860

https://apo.org.au/node/71015

https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-819434-8.00011-8

Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery - The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books - Perseus Books Group.

https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijn039

https://doi.org/10.1177/026975800901500304

Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School of Law. (2014). *Bearing witness at the International Criminal Court: An interview survey of 109 witnesses*.  
https://ssrn.com/abstract=3230513


Mertus, J. (2004). Shouting from the bottom of the well - The impact of international trials for wartime rape on women's agency. *International Feminist Journal of Politics, 6*(1), 110-128. [https://doi.org/10.1080/1461674032000165950](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461674032000165950)


Table 1. Survivors experience of bearing witness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author, Year, Location</th>
<th>Study Participants</th>
<th>Study Methods</th>
<th>Focus of Study</th>
<th>Outcomes/Result</th>
<th>Themes/Recommendations</th>
<th>Study Limitations/Future Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Androff (2012) United States of America</td>
<td>Victims who gave evidence in the Greensboro TRC N=17</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>To consider the healing assumptions of the TRC process</td>
<td>(+) Most participants reported positive healing and validating experiences from telling their story</td>
<td>Victims need a structured, safe space and respectful audience to have beneficial experience</td>
<td>Experiences are likely to vary across TRCs specific social and historical context and are not generalisable. Further research suggested on how articulating trauma can provide benefits for victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Backer (2004) South Africa</td>
<td>Victims who participated in the South African TRC N=404</td>
<td>Focus groups, surveys, follow up interviews</td>
<td>Hypothesis: participation should enhance victims’ overall perception of justice</td>
<td>(-) “... the experience of testifying was not as clearly beneficial as the common wisdom suggests” (p. 240)</td>
<td>Shortcomings in TRC process include insufficient follow up and inequities in the treatment of victims</td>
<td>Limited to the South African TRC, suggest cross national research analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brounéus (2008) Rwanda</td>
<td>Witnesses N=14 and judges N=2 who participated in Gacacas or village tribunals</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>To learn how testifying in public events affects psychological health</td>
<td>(-) The witnesses (all female) were “… threatened and harassed before, during, and after giving testimony” (p. 55)</td>
<td>Lack of support in the Gacaca process resulted in significant safety concerns for witnesses</td>
<td>Limitations of study due to poor security situation. Suggests more empirical study on truth telling and reconciliation to inform theory and policy making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brounéus (2010) Rwanda</td>
<td>Victims of the Rwandan human rights abuses N=1,200</td>
<td>Survey and diagnostic checklists</td>
<td>To investigate the assumption that truth-telling is healing</td>
<td>(-) Witnesses were found to have higher levels of depression and PTSD than non-witnesses</td>
<td>Preparation, assistance, and support of witnesses is essential</td>
<td>Longitudinal studies are required to consider the long-term effects of truth telling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Byrne (2004) South Africa</td>
<td>Victims who participated in the South African TRC. N=30</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Victim’s responses to perpetrators explanations in the TRC</td>
<td>Mixed - for some victims it was positive for others painful</td>
<td>Emerging themes were frustration with the TRC bureaucracy; the emotional and physical toll of participation; unmet expectations</td>
<td>More research needed on victim’s perspectives particularly post participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dembour &amp; Haslam (2004) The former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Victims who testified at the International</td>
<td>Analysis of witness transcripts, then interviews</td>
<td>The legal process’s treatment of traumatized witnesses</td>
<td>(-) The legal process cannot hear victims and often leaves them silenced</td>
<td>Highlights the tension between victims needs and court processes and confirming court type</td>
<td>The study drew conclusions from the examination of court transcripts. Consideration of the impact of testifying on victims and how courts can respond appropriately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funkeson et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>Women who survived the Rwandan genocide N=8</td>
<td>Semi structured interviews (Interpretative phenomenological analysis)</td>
<td>The psychological impact of the gacaca (community courts) process on witnesses</td>
<td>Witnessing can have a negative impact on psychological health; truth telling can be emotionally distressing but also relieving</td>
<td>Research on risk factors as well as beneficial factors associated with witnessing; identifying what is helpful, what eased suffering and encouraged reconciliation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guthrey (2016) Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste</td>
<td>Victims who had given testimony during the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste TRCs N=19</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Considering the role of voice and healing</td>
<td>(...) Sensitive material revealed in the TRC “… can cause some victims to feel worried or distressed … can lead to re-traumatization” (p 19)</td>
<td>The study found examples where women victims of sexual violence who testified to the TRCs were ostracised by their communities.</td>
<td>Limitations include the small number of participants across two culturally different societies and two different TRCs. Suggests the need for more research on sociocultural sensitivity in transitional justice processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamber et al. (2000) South Africa</td>
<td>Victims who gave public testimony N=8 or statements N=12 to South African TRC</td>
<td>Content analysis of transcripts of interviews</td>
<td>Victim’s attitudes, expectations, and perceptions of the TRC</td>
<td>Mixed - some victims who testified expressing relief and others felt the process was a waste of time</td>
<td>Identified the difference between public perception and individual victim perception of the TRC</td>
<td>Suggests the need for survivors to continue to express their dissatisfaction beyond the TRC including by acting through prosecutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horn et al. (2009a) Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Witnesses who had testified in the Special Court Sierra Leone N=171</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>The experience of witnesses and the factors that contribute</td>
<td>Mixed - most witnesses who experienced painful feelings, significant numbers also reported feeling confident, relief and happiness afterwards</td>
<td>Witnesses felt supported in testifying and respected by court staff</td>
<td>Limitation of retrospective nature of the study meant that some witnesses could not be contacted and may have had a contrary view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horn et al. (2009b) Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Victim-witnesses who testified in the Special Court for Sierra Leone N=144</td>
<td>Structured interviews and use of the Likert scale</td>
<td>Witnesses experience of testifying</td>
<td>Mixed - most witnesses indicated benefits from testifying and said they would testify again</td>
<td>Importance of ensuring the preparation and safety of witnesses and support prior, during and post witnessing</td>
<td>The role of current stressors and pre-existing psychological conditions on the witnesses’ experience, motivations, expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Centre UC Berkeley School</td>
<td>Witnesses who testified at the International Criminal Court (in Surveys at (i) prior to testifying, (ii) post testifying)</td>
<td>To understand witnesses’ experiences and identify process improvements</td>
<td>Mixed - varying responses from witnesses</td>
<td>Witnesses were largely satisfied with the support they had received from court</td>
<td>Suggestion that witnesses may view their participation more positively over time. Responses to the 6–12-month follow-up survey were limited.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Data Collection Method</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>Limitations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaminer et al. (2001) South Africa</td>
<td>Participants (N=134) at the South African TRC, who gave public testimony N=21, gave a testimonial statement N=70, or no testimony or statement N=43</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews and diagnostic interviews</td>
<td>Testing assumption: that testimony reduces symptoms in survivors and that forgiveness is associated with improved mental health</td>
<td>Neutral result “… the process of giving either public or closed testimony to the truth commission did not have a significant effect on psychiatric health” (p. 375)</td>
<td>“… it may be overly ambitious for truth commissions to have a therapeutic goal, except at the broader national level” (p. 375) Truth commissions should not be a replacement for good mental health support.</td>
<td>Limitations include the non-random and retrospective design of the study. Truth commissions could be enhanced by the provision of support services including mental health support. Suggests truth commissions ensure the inclusion of appropriate mental health responses for survivors and others giving testimony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanyangara et al. (2014) Rwanda</td>
<td>Survivors who participated in the Gacaca community courts N=200</td>
<td>Questionnaires and inventories</td>
<td>Focus on personal and collective guilt</td>
<td>(+) Participation led to reduced “… survivors guilt feelings, which may have enhanced their empowerment” (p. 401)</td>
<td>Consideration of how individuals experience, and narrative contributes to the collective memory, toward a shared history and reconciliation</td>
<td>Limitations of the study include: the design being quasi-experimental; non-randomised; limited by geography; lack of long term follow up. Further follow up studies suggested on the psychosocial effects of TRC processes and longitudinal follow up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King &amp; Meernik (2019) The former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Witnesses at the International Criminal Court N=300</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>The experience of witnesses</td>
<td>(+) Witnesses who experienced greater trauma were more highly motivated, believed they contributed to justice and were more positive about testifying</td>
<td>Witnesses who believed they were treated fairly by in the court were less negative. Witnesses were more positive about testifying if they had external support</td>
<td>Suggest research to examine linkages between theories about resilience and micro and macro levels of analysis across different institutions and judicial proceedings. Additional research on the impact of testifying. Recommend a witness centred approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lundy (2020) Northern Ireland</td>
<td>43 survivors of child abuse of institutional abuse</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Clarifying what is required for survivors to achieve justice</td>
<td>(Mixed) - more than half of survivors said the acknowledgement was positive, however 39% said they experienced feeling vulnerable and exposed</td>
<td>Identified needs: voice, acknowledgement, vindication; apologies; redress; repair; access to records; accountability, prosecution, historical record</td>
<td>Policymakers should explore a less intrusive, more humane, inclusive, and empowering way in which to acknowledge, vindicate, and establish an authoritative historical record.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pembroke (2019) Ireland</td>
<td>25 survivors of abuse from</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Understanding the experience of survivors who took</td>
<td>(+) Some survivors interviewed highlighted the benefits of exposing past</td>
<td>Survivors were critical of the Irish state’s official response. Welcoming the</td>
<td>State’s responses should be integrated therapeutic and participatory-centred and consider victims desire for abusers to be prosecuted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Findings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robins (2012)</td>
<td>Timor-Leste</td>
<td>Relatives of victims missing in the conflict. Interviews families N=69 relatives N=81</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews and focus groups</td>
<td>A victim-centred evaluation of transitional justice &lt;br&gt; Priorities of victims (families): Economic support, recognition, truth about the fate of the missing.</td>
<td>Identified the value of involving victims in the design and evaluation of transitional justice process to meet victim’s needs. Victim’s groups in the study had initiated the construction of local memorials bearing witness through “… rituals for reconstruction of everyday life.” (p. 103)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stein et al. (2008)</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Those who observed and those who attended the South African TRC. Total N=4351. N=26 had testified in some form</td>
<td>A nationally representative survey; including participants who attended and gave evidence to the TRC</td>
<td>Hypothesis: having a TRC relevant experience to share, or direct participation in the TRC, would be associated with greater distress and anger</td>
<td>A limitation of the study was that it occurred at a point in time where reparations were formally announced, and such reparations were viewed as insufficient by many South Africans. Points to the need for additional social and psychological supports and intervention.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepakoff et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Witnesses to the War Crimes Tribunal in Sierra Leone. Total witnesses N=147 Victims N=116</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Participants view of the positive and negative aspects of testifying &lt;br&gt; Whilst positive and negative aspects were identified the study found that the experience for was predominantly positive</td>
<td>Suggest research on the role of verbal expression in the cognitive and emotional processing of traumatic events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stover (2005)</td>
<td>The former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Witnesses at the International Criminal Court N=87</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews</td>
<td>Focused on becoming a witness; testifying in court; and returning home &lt;br&gt; Most participants said that testifying was a positive experience, believing they had a duty and had no desire to seek revenge</td>
<td>“… it is extremely difficult to make general statements about how bearing witness… will affect survivors” (p. 131)</td>
<td>There is a need for more empirical research in the area to consider the claim that publicly bearing witness can have a therapeutic benefit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Bolded numbers represent victims/survivors counted as part of this scoping study, totalling 3,192
Table 2. Critical Findings

- There is a lack of empirical studies that provide evidence for the usefulness of survivors bearing witness
- Studies identified in the review were difficult to compare and results were often polarised and/or mixed
- Bearing witness can have therapeutic value with some survivors reporting they felt; acknowledged, respected, supported, safe, empowered, catharsis, relief, closure, and they had made a contribution to justice
- Bearing witness in practice in official processes requires a survivor centred approach and the use of a trauma lens. This means being mindful of; the impact on survivors, ensuring both the psychological and physical safety, the requirement for general and specialised support, the potential to bear witness in a variety of ways, and the importance of respect and acknowledgement of the survivor’s experience
- There are many factors which contribute to survivor experience which could be improved by, for example: the engagement of survivors in the design, development and evaluation of bearing witness processes, and the provision of psychological support for survivors before, during and after survivors bear witness.

Table 3. Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

Policy Implications
- Policy involving bearing witness needs to be survivor centred, trauma focused and ensure safety
- Official processes should consider the involvement of survivors, survivor advocates and trauma specialists in the design, delivery, provision of support and evaluation of services

Research Implications
- There is a need for empirical studies to understand the utility and circumstances in which bearing witness is employed
- Studies considering survivors of childhood sexual abuse bearing witness, and studies which consider the use of bearing witness in an ongoing way, are current gaps and provide opportunities for future research

Practice Implications
- Those involved in processes where survivors are bearing witness should be familiar with trauma informed core values and practice
- Survivors need to be supported before, during and after a bearing witness process
- Consideration should be given to a variety of ways that survivors can bear witness
- Official processes should consider the use of skilled mental health professionals to provide education, support and debriefing, both to survivors bearing witness and staff who have an important role in listening and acknowledgement.
Figure 1: The study flow, including the number of records and reasons for inclusion and exclusion.

Identification:
- n = 894 titles and abstracts from EBSCO, Informit, CINHAL, Clarivate, ProQuest and Sage
- n = 307 additional records identified including grey literature searching

Screening:
- Additional articles identified through reference scanning (n = 3)
- Records screened at level 1 (N = 1,201)
- N = 715 excluded
- Removed duplicates

Eligibility:
- Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (N = 489)
- N = 405 excluded
- Excluded book reviews, editorials, commentary
- N = 84 studies included for data abstraction
- N = 84 studies included: n = 17 published studies
- n = 2 reports
- n = 1 book
- n = 1 dissertation
- N = 63 excluded
- No clear research method (n = 29)
- Participants were not victims / survivors (n = 23)
- Could not locate full text (n = 11)
Authors biographies

**Paul Wyles** a PhD candidate at Griffith University is a social worker (MSW) who has career experience in practice, policy and management in child protection, youth justice and mental health. He is interested in how lived experience can inform policy improvement and the translation of research into practice with a focus on violence, gender, and recovery from childhood trauma.

**Prof. Patrick O’Leary** has worked both as a practitioner and a researcher in the areas of gendered violence in Australia, the USA and the UK. He is an internationally recognised researcher with significant expertise in domestic violence/gender-based violence, child protection, the long-term impact of child sexual abuse (especially for men), social work, and socially excluded young people.

**Assoc. Prof. Menka Tsantefski** is a senior lecturer and researcher at Southern Cross University. She has substantial practice and research experience and interest in domestic and family violence, child protection and problematic parental substance use.